

BOOKLET TO PRINT

Saint Petronilla

Life, prayer and novena

Feast day: May 31

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IN BRIEF

Saint Petronilla

Roman virgin and martyr of the earliest Church, called the daughter of Saint Peter, former patron saint of the kings of France.

Feast day	May 31
Died	late 1st century, Rome
Canonized	pre-congregation (immemorial cult)
Era	1st century
Patron saint of	France, people with fever

In this booklet

Life

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Novena to Saint Petronilla

Credits and sources

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LIFE

Saint Petronilla

Saint Petronilla was a Roman virgin and martyr of the late first or early second century, buried in the Catacomb of Domitilla on the Via Ardeatina. An ancient tradition made her the daughter, spiritual or even by blood, of the Apostle Saint Peter. Her relics, moved to the Vatican in the eighth century, rest in Saint Peter's Basilica. Long regarded as the patron saint of the kings of France, she is celebrated on May 31, when a Mass for France is offered in Rome.

Who was Saint Petronilla?

Like many saints of the first centuries, Petronilla is almost unknown to us. Two things are certain: her name, and the title of martyr that the early Church gave her. Both appear on a fresco from the late fourth century in the Catacomb of Domitilla, where she is shown welcoming into heaven a deceased woman named Veneranda, with the inscription *Petronella mart(yr)*. In the earliest times of the Church, the title of martyr was sometimes also given to those who had confessed their faith before a court without being executed.

Her full name, according to the inscription on her sarcophagus recorded in the *Liber Pontificalis*, was *Aurelia Petronilla*. Historians see in it the name of a Roman family, perhaps linked to the Flavians, the family of the emperors Vespasian, Titus and Domitian, who owned the land of the catacomb.

Key dates in the life of Saint Petronilla

- **Late first century**: Lives and dies in Rome, according to tradition.
- **Burial**: In the Catacomb of Domitilla, near the martyrs Nereus and Achilleus.

- **Late fourth century**: A fresco depicts her in the underground basilica of the catacomb, built under Pope Siricius.
- **Sixth century**: The Passion that makes her the daughter of Saint Peter is written.
- **757**: Pope Paul I moves her sarcophagus to a rotunda beside Saint Peter's Basilica.
- **Around 800**: Charlemagne venerates her tomb; the chapel becomes that of the Frankish kings.
- **1497-1499**: Michelangelo carves the *Pietà* for the Chapel of Saint Petronilla.

The daughter of Saint Peter

In the sixth century, the Passion of Saints Nereus and Achilleus told the story of Petronilla. Her name was then linked to that of Peter, *Petrus*, and people concluded that she was his daughter. Older texts, the *Acts of Peter*, already spoke of a daughter of the apostle, paralyzed and then healed by him. In the Middle Ages, the *Golden Legend* took up the story again.

Three days of prayer

According to this tradition, a Roman nobleman named Flaccus, attracted by her beauty, asked to marry her. Petronilla, who had consecrated herself to God, refused. Flaccus gave her three days to accept. She spent that time fasting and praying, received Communion, and died peacefully on the third day. Flaccus arrived only to attend her funeral. Her companion Felicula, who also refused to marry Flaccus, was put to death.

Historians consider this account legendary. Yet it expresses the choice of consecrated virginity, so highly honored in the early Church, and the freedom of a young Christian woman to give her life to Christ.

The chapel of the kings of France

In 757, after the Lombards had ravaged the country around Rome, Pope Saint Paul I had Petronilla's sarcophagus moved to the Vatican, into one of the ancient rotundas next to Saint Peter's Basilica. King Pepin the Short, the pope's ally, is said to have wished his daughter to be baptized near this tomb. Charlemagne came to pray there. The chapel was entrusted to the Frankish kings, and Petronilla, "daughter of Peter," became in a sense the patron saint of France, the "eldest daughter of the Church."

The kings of France maintained the chapel for centuries. Louis XI had it embellished in the fifteenth century. Cardinal Jean de Bilhères, ambassador of Charles VIII, commissioned the young Michelangelo to carve a *Pietà* for his tomb in the chapel: it is the famous statue now seen in Saint Peter's Basilica. The rotunda disappeared when the new basilica was built, but Petronilla's relics were kept inside it.

Her cult today

In Saint Peter's Basilica, an altar is dedicated to Saint Petronilla. It is decorated with a mosaic reproducing Guercino's great painting of 1623, which shows the opening of her tomb and her welcome into heaven by Christ. Every May 31, a Mass for France is celebrated there, to which the French community in Rome is invited. Her name has also given French many first names, such as Perrine and Pernelle.

Many visitors to Saint Peter's walk past Michelangelo's *Pietà* without knowing that it was first made for her chapel.

Why is Saint Petronilla the patron saint of France?

Her patronage of France comes from history rather than from her own life. When the popes allied themselves with the Frankish kings in the eighth century, her chapel at the Vatican was entrusted to them. The "daughter of

Peter" became the natural protector of the kingdom that called itself the "eldest daughter of the Church." She is also traditionally invoked against fevers.

Symbols and how to recognize Saint Petronilla in art

- **The martyr's palm**: she is often shown as a young woman holding a palm.
- **The open tomb**: in Guercino's painting, her body is lifted from the tomb while she is received in heaven above.
- **Welcoming a soul**: in the Domitilla fresco, she leads the deceased Veneranda into paradise.

What can we learn from Saint Petronilla?

Of Petronilla, we have mostly a name, a tomb and a fresco. That is enough to say what matters: a young Christian of Rome who gave her life to Christ in the earliest days of the Church, close to the memory of the Apostle Peter. Her story, woven into that of France, recalls the ancient bonds between Christian nations and the See of Peter. We can pray to her for France, for young women consecrated to God, and for the sick suffering from fever.

Where to pray to Saint Petronilla

- **Rome**: the altar of Saint Petronilla in Saint Peter's Basilica, where her relics rest.
- **Rome**: the Catacomb of Domitilla, on the Via Ardeatina, the place of her first burial.
- **France**: the many churches and chapels dedicated to her, especially in Normandy, Brittany and Burgundy.

To pray with her, use the Prayer to Saint Petronilla or the Novena to Saint Petronilla.

PRAYER

Prayer to Saint Petronilla for France and the Sick

There is no standard traditional prayer to Saint Petronilla in English. Saintspedia offers an original prayer inspired by what tradition remembers of her: a young Roman woman consecrated to Christ, close to Saint Peter, and the long friendship that binds her to France. This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia.

A saint of the earliest Church

Petronilla belongs to the very first generation of Christians in Rome. Tradition calls her the spiritual daughter of the Apostle Peter and tells that she preferred prayer and death to a forced marriage. Her relics now rest in Saint Peter's Basilica, where every May 31 a Mass is offered for France.

Prayer to Saint Petronilla for France and the Sick

Saint Petronilla, tradition calls you the daughter of Peter:
keep me faithful to the Church built on the faith of the apostles.

You chose Christ rather than a forced marriage:
support those who are pressured to act against their conscience,
and bless the young people who consecrate themselves to God.

You spent your last days in fasting and prayer:
teach me to entrust my difficult decisions to God.

You are invoked against fevers:
relieve the sick and those who care for them.

The kings of France honored you for centuries:
watch over France, its people and the Church that lives there,
and over my own country too.
I entrust to you my intention: (name it in silence).

Saint Petronilla, pray for us. Amen.

This prayer is an original text by Saintspedia, free to use for personal and community prayer.

When to pray this prayer

Saint Petronilla is celebrated on May 31, the day a Mass for France is offered in Saint Peter's Basilica. You can pray to her:

- for France and for your own country;
- for someone with a fever or a sick child;
- at a time of an important decision, especially about your vocation;
- for young people who feel pressured to act against their faith or conscience.

A short prayer with Saint Peter

> *Saint Peter, rock of the Church, and Saint Petronilla, your daughter in the faith, pray for the Pope and for all of us, that we may remain one in Christ. Amen.*

For a longer devotion, pray the Novena to Saint Petronilla, and read about her life.

NOVENA

Novena to Saint Petronilla

This novena to Saint Petronilla is an original composition by Saintspedia, inspired by what history and tradition tell of her: a young Roman Christian close to the memory of Saint Peter, a woman consecrated to God, and the patron long honored by the kings of France. To end on her feast day, May 31, begin on May 23. Because May is the month of Mary, this novena can easily be joined to a daily Hail Mary or Rosary.

How to pray this novena

Each day, begin with the Sign of the Cross and entrust your intention to God. Read the short meditation, say the prayer of the day, then pray an Our Father, a Hail Mary and a Glory Be. End with: "Saint Petronilla, pray for us." The small act suggested each day helps prolong the prayer. You may pray it for a sick person, for a young person discerning a vocation, or for your country. If you miss a day, simply continue with the next one.

Day 1: A name remembered

Of Petronilla we know little more than a name, a tomb and a fresco. Yet the Church has remembered her for nearly two thousand years. God knows each of us by name, even if the world forgets us.

Prayer: Saint Petronilla, remind me that God knows me by name and loves me. Help me to live for him, not for the praise of others. Amen.

Today: Pray for someone whose name no one remembers: a forgotten person, a lonely neighbor, a stranger.

Day 2: Daughter of Peter

Tradition calls Petronilla the daughter of Saint Peter, perhaps in the spirit, perhaps by blood. Either way, she reminds us that we receive the faith from the apostles, handed down through the generations.

Prayer: Saint Petronilla, keep me faithful to the faith of the apostles. Bless the Pope, successor of Peter, and all who teach the faith. Amen.

Today: Read a passage from the First Letter of Peter.

Day 3: Consecrated to Christ

According to the legend, Petronilla had consecrated herself to God. She belonged to Christ with an undivided heart. Every Christian, in marriage or in consecrated life, is called to give Christ the first place.

Prayer: Saint Petronilla, bless all women and men consecrated to God. Help young people to hear and answer God's call generously. Amen.

Today: Pray for vocations to religious life and the priesthood.

Day 4: Saying no to pressure

When Flaccus asked to marry her, Petronilla refused. She did not give in to the pressure of a powerful man. Freedom of conscience is a gift that must sometimes be defended.

Prayer: Saint Petronilla, give courage to all who are pressured to act against their conscience or their faith. Protect young women from every kind of coercion. Amen.

Today: Support someone who is facing pressure, with a word, a call or a prayer.

Day 5: Three days of prayer

Given three days to decide, Petronilla spent them in fasting and prayer. Before a difficult choice, she turned first to God.

Prayer: Saint Petronilla, teach me to bring my decisions to God before acting. Give me light and peace when I do not know what to do. Amen.

Today: Bring a decision you must make to God in silent prayer, without hurrying.

Day 6: The Eucharist, strength for the journey

The legend says that Petronilla received Communion before she died. The Body of Christ is the food that sustains us on the road to heaven.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, through the prayers of Saint Petronilla, increase my love for the Eucharist. May I receive you with faith and gratitude. Amen.

Today: Attend Mass if you can, or make a spiritual communion.

Day 7: For the sick

Petronilla is invoked against fevers. We bring to her all who are ill, especially children with fevers and those whose suffering is long and hidden.

Prayer: Saint Petronilla, relieve the sick, especially those with fever. Strengthen doctors, nurses and families who care for them. Amen.

Today: Visit, call or write to someone who is sick.

Day 8: For France and for every nation

For centuries, the kings of France honored Petronilla's chapel at the Vatican, and every May 31 a Mass is still offered there for France. We pray for France, and also for our own country.

Prayer: Saint Petronilla, watch over France and over my own country. Inspire those who govern to seek justice, peace and the common good. Amen.

Today: Pray for the leaders of your country by name.

Day 9: Welcomed into heaven

In the Domitilla fresco, Petronilla welcomes a deceased woman, Veneranda, into paradise. Guercino painted her own welcome into heaven by Christ. On this last day, we lift our eyes to the joy that awaits us.

Prayer: Saint Petronilla, you who welcome souls into heaven, pray for our beloved dead, and help me to persevere until I see God face to face. Amen.

Today: Pray for a deceased loved one.

Closing prayer

> *Lord God, you gave Saint Petronilla a heart consecrated to you and faithful to the faith of the apostles. Through her prayers, heal the sick, strengthen those who face pressure, bless France and every nation, and grant the intentions I have placed before you during these nine days. Bring us all, with her, to the joy of heaven. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

You can also pray the Prayer to Saint Petronilla or read her life.

CREDITS

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